

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## Lesson 6

### Matthew – Part Six

#### Parables in the Book of Matthew

## I. BACKGROUND

*What is a parable?*

A parable is a comparison of some truth (which is known from ordinary life) or common sense to a teaching point that Jesus wants to explain. Our word comes from the Greek word *parabole*, which means “to set beside” or “to compare.” In the study of Greek rhetoric, *parabole* referenced a type of speech where one would compare one thing to another in order to make a point. Sometimes these *parabole*’s were as simple as a simile (“He fought like a lion”); other times they were more detailed like a story.

*Why did Jesus speak in parables?*

Jesus spoke in parables for a number of reasons. First, the human mind relates well and enjoys a good story! Stories are memorable, engaging, and great teaching tools. Additionally, Jesus spoke in stories to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy. Matthew points out that the Messiah would “open [his] mouth in parables” (quoting Psalm 78:2). In Matthew 13:10, Jesus’ apostles asked him why he spoke in parables. Jesus’ answer is a difficult passage to understand. Jesus said:

*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you but not to them... This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.’ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ (Isaiah 6:9-10).*

While many view this passage differently (depending, for example, on one’s views of predestination), one thing is clear to most everyone: There

were people who had hardened hearts and deaf ears and could not truly listen to what Jesus had to say. To these people, Jesus was not speaking in a direct fashion at that moment. The interesting contrast, however, is seen in Jesus using these very same parables to communicate truths to those who were open to hear. Still, at times, the parables were a bit out of reach for the apostles who frequently had to ask for a little insight into the stories.

## **II. PARABLES**

### *The Parable of the Sower*

Matthew 13:1-23 records Jesus teaching on the parable of the sower. In the story, a farmer scatters his seed for his crop. The seed falls upon 4 different surfaces: 1) the path; 2) rocky soil; 3) among thorns; and 4) on good soil. The birds immediately eat the seed on the path. The rocky soil causes the seed to sprout quickly, but wither when the sun gets hot because of a lack of roots. The seed among the thorns grows but ultimately bears no fruit because it gets choked out. The seed on the good soil produces 30–100 times the seed planted.

In verses 19–23, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable. The parable focuses on those who hear about the kingdom of God. Jesus says those who hear but do not understand are like the path where the seed never sprouts but is eaten by birds. Those who receive the message with joy but fall away once persecution or troubles come are like the rocky soil that doesn't have enough soil depth to provide for roots that can sustain the plants during the harsh sun. Those who hear but are unfruitful because of their consuming worries of life and the deceitfulness of money are like the seed among the thorns that choke out the plants. Those who hear the message, accept it, grow, thrive and bear fruit are like the seed that falls in the rich soil and bear a bumper crop.

### *The Parable of the Weeds*

In 13:24-30, Jesus tells the Parable of the Weeds. In this story, Jesus relates that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in a field. After the planting, the man and his crew go to sleep. In the night, an enemy comes in and plants weeds among the seed. As the seed and weeds grow up together, the crew questions whether the man planted good seed or bad. The farmer explains that he planted good seed, but an enemy planting weeds sabotaged the crop. The servants want to pull the weeds, but the farmer tells them to wait for harvest time. When the wheat is ripe, the

servants are to pull the weeds, burn them, and then gather the wheat for harvest.

In verses 36-43, Jesus explains the parable. The sower/farmer is “the son of man” – Jesus. The field is the world and the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. The enemy is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age and the harvesters are the angels. Jesus says that at the end of the age, the angels will gather those not in the kingdom for burning and gather those sons of the kingdom for glory.

#### *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*

In 13:31-35, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed planted. While it is the smallest of the seeds, it grows into the largest of the plants. Jesus does not provide the interpretation of this parable, but its meaning is not hard to discern. History, itself, shows that from the ministry of this one man came his apostles, and eventually, enough followers to totally transform not only the Roman Empire, but also the whole world.

#### *The Parable of the Yeast*

Similar to the mustard seed parable is that of yeast. Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a bit of yeast that is mixed with a large batch of dough. As the little yeast works its way through the dough, all of the dough reacts, grows, and is leavened. As with the mustard seed parable, Jesus offers no interpretation of this parable either. History again provides it with meaning in much the same fashion as the mustard seed parable.

#### *The Parables of Hidden Treasure, The Pearl, and the Net*

Chapter 13 of Matthew ends with three more brief parables. Verse 44 is a parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to hidden treasure found in a field. The discoverer sells his possessions and buys the field to gain the treasure. Verse 45 likens the kingdom of heaven to a valuable pearl. After discovering the pearl, a man sells his possessions and buys it. Verses 47-50 tell the story of a fisherman who casts his net into the water and pulls out a load of fish. The man sits on the bank and sorts the fish, keeping the good and discarding the bad. Jesus notes that angels will do the same with people.

#### *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*

Matthew 18 has the next two parables. In 18:10-14, Jesus speaks of the man who has 100 sheep but loses one that wanders off. The shepherd leaves the 99 to find the one missing sheep. The man finds greater rejoice over finding the lost sheep than was experienced by not having lost the 99. Jesus says that in the same way, we are to see that little children are not lost or damaged but are cared for. Prior to giving this parable, Matthew quoted Jesus saying that children are the “greatest” in the kingdom of heaven.

### *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*

After a dialogue on the necessity of forgiving others, Jesus relates the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35. In this parable, a king decides to settle up with the servants that owe him. The first servant is called in to repay his debt of 10,000 talents (think over a million dollars). The servant has no means to pay, so the King starts to sell the servant’s wife and kids to pay off the debt. The servant begins pleading to the king for time, and the king is moved with pity and cancels the debt.

This now debt-free servant goes out to collect on a few debts owed to him. The servant finds another fellow who owes the servant a few dollars. Because the debtor cannot pay, the debt-free servant has the debtor thrown in prison. When the king hears of this occurrence, he goes ballistic. The king summons the ungrateful servant and condemns the lack of mercy by one who had known the blessing of mercy. The king has the original servant thrown in prison and tortured. Jesus uses this parable as a teaching tool to let us know how God treats those who do not forgive others.

### *The Parable of the Vineyard Workers*

After Jesus had a run-in with a rich young ruler, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard workers in 20:1-16. A landowner hires a crew to work a full 12-hour day in return for a full day’s wage (*i.e.*, 1 denarius). Three hours later, the owner finds another crew and hires them to finish working the remaining 9 hours of the work-day in return for a promised payment of “what’s right.” After another three, six, and even nine hours, the owner hires even more crews for “what’s right.” The last crew would have worked only 3 hours once the day was done.

When the work-day was over, the owner paid all the crews 1 denarius each, whether they worked 12 or 3 hours. The landowner makes it a point to pay the most recent crews first **IN FRONT OF THE EARLIER CREWS**. This action incenses the early birds who are appalled that they got no more money than the late comers. Jesus rebukes this attitude when the

landowner says, “Friend ... I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree [to your terms]? Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (20:13-15)

Jesus makes his point that we are all subject to God’s generosity. Jesus also relates that the story shows the first will be last and the last first.

### *Parable of the Two Sons*

Matthew 21:28-32 recounts the parable of the two sons. This parable, and the next two, follows incidents where the power structure of the Jewish people questions the authority of Jesus. The parable asks the question: in this scenario, which son obeys his father? Son 1 is asked to go work. Son 1 says no, but then changes his mind and goes to work. Son 2 is given the same directive, but unlike Son 1, Son 2 says “yes” but then never goes to work. Jesus points out that those people who at first said “no,” but ultimately said “yes,” illustrates why tax collectors and prostitutes will beat the Pharisees and others into the kingdom.

### *The Parable of the Tenants*

In Mathew 21:33-46, the kingdom of heaven is likened to a landlord who lets out a first class vineyard operation in return for a share of the results. After harvest, the owner sends some workers to collect for him. The tenants not only refuse to pay the king’s emissaries, but the tenants have those emissaries killed. The king sends a second group who are also killed. Finally, the king sends his son figuring that his son will command respect and decency. The son, however, is also killed. Jesus assures those listening that the king will bring just retribution to those responsible. Quoting Psalm 118:22-23, Jesus says that the “stone the builders rejected has become the capstone.” The Chief Priests and Pharisees realized that Jesus was talking about them in this parable.

### *The Parable of the Wedding Banquet*

Matthew 22:1-14 adds a last “authority” parable among these three. The kingdom of heaven is likened to a lavish wedding banquet thrown for a son where the invitees refused to come. Servants are then sent to retrieve those for the banquet only to be killed by the invitees. The king gets furious and sends for anyone to come to the wedding. He also destroys the murderers and burns their city. The new crowd does in fact come, but even then, one fellow is not properly dressed. The king has that fellow booted out. Jesus ends the parable explaining that “many are invited, but few are chosen.”

### *The Parable of the 10 Virgins*

Matthew 25:1-13 contains this parable. This parable follows Jesus explaining to his apostles that no man knows the time or hour of Jesus' returning. Jesus then relates the story of 10 virgins who were in charge of lighting for a wedding processional. The women were to carry their lamps and illuminate the procession to the banquet room. Five of the women were wise, while five were fools. The wise brought extra oil; the fools did not. Delays caused the bridegroom and the processional to start late. The five fools went out to get more oil and wound up missing the whole banquet. Jesus' point is the need always to be ready.

### *Parable of the Talents*

The last parable in Matthew deals with a man leaving and entrusting 3 servants with a load of money. Matthew 25:14-30 recounts how servant A got 5 talents, Servant B got 2 talents, and Servant C got 1 talent. Both Servants A and B invested the money while the owner was gone and doubled their amount. Lazily, Servant C hid his 1 talent and returned it to the man upon his return without even banking interest. The man gives the 1 talent to the servant who turned 5 talents into 10. Jesus drives home the point that we are to use what God gives us.

## **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. Be good soil.
2. Don't be deceived by riches or worries.
3. Watch out for Children
4. Forgive others.
5. Accept God's generosity for yourself and others.
6. Jesus has authority.
7. Be ready; he will return.
8. Use your gifts.